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GEISHA FEVER: CHANGES IN THE TRADITIONAL ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICTS IN KYOTO IN RESPONSE TO EXCESSIVE ATTENTION FROM WESTERN TOURISTS

Abstract

In the popular discourse, *geiko* districts are described as places where traditional culture is preserved in a living form. Although this statement may be considered as true, the *geiko* community is a part of Japanese society as a whole and does not exist in complete isolation. Being able to survive as guardians of the Japanese tradition, in the 21st century *geiko* are discovering new opportunities, such as using new media to promote themselves in order to protect their lifestyle. However, outside world has forced them to change the way they manage their business in the districts. By using their own Internet sites, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts to reach new customers, they display their daily routine, one in which traditional culture meets modern ideas. This paper shows the reception of usage of the Internet in traditional entertainment districts of Kyoto and the response of Western tourists to the *geisha* phenomenon. It appears that overwhelming attention on the part of tourist industry, as well as commercialisation, are becoming a threat to the values which have cemented relationships between customers, *geiko* and teahouses owners. For instance, while during the so-called “geisha hunting”, tourists often try to take photographs of them at all costs. Considering the aspects of *geiko* life and processes mentioned above it is worth analysing how the image of the *geiko* is perceived by Westerners.

Key words: *maiko*, *geiko*, Kyoto, stereotypes, commercialisation

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INTRODUCTION

Japan can be seen as a land of contrasts. In this land, there are robots of the automated world of the future, *shinkansen* bullet trains travelling as quick as lightening, colourful subcultures of the younger generation, and the masses of *salaryman* going to their workplaces. There are also pagodas, temples, Mount Fuji, and cherry trees in full bloom. Finally, there is “she”, the *geisha*, that ambiguous figure so hard to define. She is a myth, she is a symbol, she is a dream, she is everything what one wants to see in her. It seems that everyone knows who she is, and, at the same time, no one is aware of her true nature.

This paper aims to show the relationship between tourists and traditional entertainment districts in Kyoto, called *kagai*, of which *geisha* is a staple element. They embrace five quarters, namely: Gion Kōbu, Gion Higashi, Kamishichiken, Ponto-chō and Miyagawa-chō, known by the joint term *gokagai* (“five flower towns”). Each of them possesses a distinctive atmosphere related to its origins and each is inseparably connected with the old capital’s culture and lifestyle. These districts are also a workplace for the *geiko* and the *maiko*, the *geiko*’s apprentice (Mizobuchi, 2002, p. 5). In Japan, the terms *geiko* and *geisha* are territorially related. *Geishas* work in quarters of Tokyo², while *geiko* operate in Kyoto. In order to embrace all communities sharing the same occupation, the term *geigi* is used (Nishio, 2007, p. 14).

The examples under consideration have been chosen to demonstrate the situation in Kyoto, and to portray some of the ways in which the districts cope with contemporary challenges. The outside world, including foreign tourists, have caused changes in the traditional entertainment industry’s business strategies. At the same time, *geiko* communities are also introducing changes in order to survive. It appears that the media has become a tool in their hands in order to establish contact with the rest of the world. Moreover, there is a question of the excessive commercialisation of *kagai* in order to meet the demands of the tourist industry. This conflict of interests may pose a threat to traditional values which bond the *geiko* community together.

² For the purpose of this paper, the term “geisha” will be used when describing the Western perception and image.

MYSTERY, MYTH AND BEAUTY

Over time, while looking for a perfect definition of the *geisha*, it appears that the question of how a *geisha* is seen and who sees her has become increasingly important. Impressions and stereotypes, repeated and replicated, have led to the misunderstanding of the essence of being a *geiko*. As a result, there is the *geiko*'s truth about themselves, the ambivalent opinions of Japanese society, and finally the Western image.

Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979) shows how the Occident created an image of the Orient. Although his works are based mostly on cases from Arabic countries, the East Asian nations were also orientalist by the West. Kawaguchi Yoko's *Butterfly's Sisters* (2010) presents a concept similar to that of Said's, yet it is focused on the portrayal of Japanese women, especially *geisha* figures, in popular culture. Kawaguchi examines various examples which show extreme characteristics of a *geisha* who can act as a glorified star, while also being able to sacrifice herself. She can be weak, or have a brave nature, can be humble or be acutely aware of her sexuality (Kawaguchi, 2010, pp. 1–11). Shibusawa (2006, p. 12) indicates that "the notion of the *geisha* – a very marginal cultural institution in Japanese society – was central to postwar America's vision of Japan". The American film industry gladly used *geisha* heroines in several ways. Marchetti (1994, pp. 178–179) states that popularity of this motif in the USA during the post-occupation Japan period was, on one hand, the sign of reconciliation, while on the other, changing the perception of Japan to a more subordinate one. The brave spirit of the Japanese past was overshadowed by the mysterious, yet submissive women. Hollywood films used oriental visions of Japan created in the 19th century, in which *geisha* and the blooming cherry were paired as a set, to sell new productions. The described world seemed to be the white man's paradise, where an exotic beauty readily chooses him as superior to all other men. As a by-product, Japan found itself in the eye of consumer interest (Shibusawa, 2006, pp. 273–274). Perkins, in *Geisha of Pontocho* published in 1954, observes two essential points of a foreigner's journey to Kyoto that can be summarised as "first the temples, shrines and souvenirs, and second a Geisha party". He points out that a potential customer's imagination draws a fanciful scene of dance combined with striptease as a part of the prepared amusement (Perkins & Haar, 1954, p. 13). The film industry was not the only medium which helped to sustain stereotypical images. In the US edition of the fashion magazine *Vogue*, in the

issues published between July 1997 and June 2008, the *geisha* figure embodied traditional aesthetics; she was an artist but at the same time, she was not free from an exoticising gaze (Choi, Medvedev, Lee & Hunt-Hurst, 2009, p. 8). As far as travel writing is concerned, there is a high possibility of finding the *geisha* portrayed in its pages, as Berger observed in 2010. She is the foreigner's fantasy, a continuation of a mythical Japan; she becomes the symbol of what a tourist wants to find, namely "that imagined Japan" they are looking for (Berger, 2010, pp. 61–62, 65).

Analysing the place of *geigi* in Japanese culture, Carihfield Dalby (1983, pp. 172–173) acknowledges their ambiguity. For this society, *geigi* can be proudly put in the spotlight, when needed, to entertain foreign guests or reveal to the public their personal experience. At the same time, the thought that their own daughters might choose this way of life would not be at all pleasant. Foreman (2005, p. 33) identifies the choice of artistic career over family duties as the main factor that shows these women in a bad light. This is why, generally speaking, it would be an unlikely choice of occupation for a respectable woman.

Considering the voices from *geigi* themselves, Foreman formulated two definitions. The first, presenting the community point of view states that:

Geisha are women who are officially registered as *geisha*, *geiko*, or *geigi* through a central *kumiai*³ office affiliated with each separate *hanamachi geisha* district. Furthermore, geisha are defined as those actively studying music and/or dance within the community of teachers associated with that *hanamachi*, and they are actively involved with the performances associated with that *hanamachi* and its group of teachers. (Foreman, 2008, p. 3)

This definition focuses on the official character of being a *geigi* and on fulfilling her artistic career path under the guidance of teachers accredited by the community to which she belongs. The other presents a broader view of the *geigi's* activities, mentioning being registered in a central office and studying music and dance. It says that *geigi* "perform music and dance for parties in order to pay for their art lessons and elaborate public stage performances" (Foreman, 2005, p. 34). The other point of view does not overlook the economic aspect of the profession, treated as a source of income for these women.

³ A *geisha* union (Foreman, 2008, p. xi).

CHASING THE SYMBOL OF KYOTO

Commercialisation of the *geiko* image involves difficulties in understanding the characteristics of the occupation of *geiko* by visitors. It should be noted that the scale of this problem is not limited only to incidents caused by foreigners coming to the old capital, but it includes also those caused by the Japanese themselves (Johnston, 2009). One of the biggest challenges is the growing popularity of the so-called “geisha hunting” phenomenon. This term is used in popular discourse to describe the behaviour of tourists who are practising a new form of “safari” on the streets of traditional entertainment districts. Their main goal is not only to see *maiko*, the object of their desire, but also to take a photograph of them as a trophy. In this game, a tourist plays the role of a hunter, equipped with a camera or a smartphone, chasing not an animal, but a living human being.

How do common people know about the “geisha hunt”, and how does this idea spread? An English-speaking Internet user is able to learn the basics from tourist guides and traveller sites without any difficulty. One of the examples can be *The Passport Lifestyle* which offers *The insider’s guide to geisha hunting in Kyoto*. Beside sharing advice about the most suitable locations and time to notice a *geiko*, its author explains her point of view. Potential tourists can read that “seeing a geisha in Japan is like spotting a tiger in the wild in Thailand; viewing them in their native environment is just far more beautiful. It’s magical” (Stephanie, 2016). They are invited “to do something unique and exciting in Japan” (Castillo, 2016), encouraged by reading the previous participant’s memories, whose “mind stopped for a moment” after seeing a dazzling *maiko* (McCulley, 2013). It seems that a large number of people try to catch a glimpse of *geiko* at all costs, creating an uproar, along with dangerous situations such as pushing or barring the path of *maiko* who are in a hurry, wearing platform shoes and a heavy outfit. Also problematic are the cases of tourists invading *geiko*’s private space, by following them and getting into physical contact. Such people have also been known to touch a *maiko*’s elaborate coiffure or luxurious costume, which may be irretrievably ruined. In response to such actions, the local community has decided to protect *geiko* and *maiko* by forming special patrols to monitor the situation on the streets and ensure safe passage for the *geiko* (Johnston, 2009; Tanikawa, 2009). Beside these initiatives, official campaigns managed by Kyoto City Tourism Association can be observed, such as placing an appeal aimed at tourists in the

entertainment section of the association's official site, calling them to respect the *maiko's* privacy, or issuing of the *Akimahen of Kyoto* etiquette guide flyers informing them how not to behave towards *geiko*. These leaflets describe in a simple way what is considered as an example of inappropriate behaviour while spending time in Kyoto, including harassing *maiko* on the streets (Kyoto City Tourism Association, n.d.).

However, the tourist has become a new type of a customer whose will to interact with *geiko* cannot be negated. It appears that traditional entertainment districts are trying to meet the visitors' expectations by offering them some special kinds of entertainment. One of the locations where visitors can see a short performance held by *maiko*, and also enjoy the exhibition of hair accessories or see dance performances, is the Gion Corner. A *Kyōmai*⁴ show is a part of the program there, in which a few types of traditional art performances may be seen (Ookini Zaidan, n.d.). Nishio (2010–2011a, p. 10) observes that the tourist who watches such shows is offered culture presented “in an easy-to-understand way”. A similar project, named Maiko Theatre and devoted entirely to introducing *geiko* culture to tourists, has been operated by Shigemori *ochaya* in Miyagawa-chō, since December 2016. The *okāsan's*⁵ main goal is to allow foreigners and younger Japanese generations discover this aspect of Japanese culture (Tsubone-ana net, 2017). This example shows that the families which run teahouses are starting to manage additional enterprises, with more commercial characteristics, which let them expand their existing income sources. This decision provides a possibility to benefit from a new group of customers, while maintaining the prestige of the teahouse itself, as well as its established rules.

However, the discord between fixed, unwritten rules concerning customer-teahouse relations and tourists' requirements is becoming a challenge for teahouse owners. Aihara (2012, pp. 121–123) indicates that every *ochaya* treasures a long-term relationship with customers based on mutual trust. Even if nowadays gaining entry to *ozashiki*⁶ for *ichigensan*⁷

⁴ One of the styles of traditional Japanese dance. *Kyōmai* is taught by Inoue school and practiced by *geiko* and *maiko* working in Gion Kōbu (Sugita & Mizobuchi, 2003, p. 81).

⁵ A title given to a proprietress of an *ochaya* (teahouse), meaning literally “mother” (Hanawa, 2007, p. 47).

⁶ A party being held in an *ochaya* with a *maiko* and *geiko* companion (Foster, 2009, p. 42).

⁷ A new customer who is unfamiliar with the teahouse, thus, according to the rules is not allowed to participate in a party (Sato, 2006, p. 93).

is becoming easier, it does not automatically signify that all of the community welcomes these changes easily. One of the reasons is the character of the teahouse itself, which is not only a place to run a business, but also a home for the proprietress, young *maiko* and *geiko*. Despite this, examples of teahouses which practice an open-door policy for two types of customers may be observed. For instance, Gion Higashi's Tomikiku *ochaya* openly invites new customers who would like to enjoy *geiko* hospitality, to make reservation for "a special plan" celebration. The transparency of the fixed product on offer, including the prices, or a possibility to negotiate a plan for students, are its strong points. At the same time, luxury banquets on regular basis, accessible only by recommendation of a long-time customer, are held (Tomikiku, n.d.). Furthermore, hotels aim to meet the expectations of tourists who do not want to attend a party at an *ochaya*. A representative example may be Gion Hatanaka Ryokan. By choosing this option, a customer is able to book a room for a night and a meeting with *maiko*, as an addition to his reservation, or he can also visit the place only for this purpose. The attraction on offer is called a *Kyoto Cuisine & Maiko Evening*, and allows tourists experience the company of *geiko*. Foreign customers are supported by English-speaking staff who will help them communicate with the *maiko*. There is also a possibility of making a payment by credit card (Gion Hatanaka, n.d.). This form of payment is not accepted in the Tomikiku *ochaya* (Tomikiku, n.d.). As Nishio (2010–2011b, pp. 61–62) states, none of the Kyoto teahouses honours cards. Moreover, a transaction is finalised later in order to lighten the customer's burden on the day of planned gathering, which is also a natural extension of long-term relationships with customers, in which trust is the foundation of everything. Furthermore, according to Aihara (2012, pp. 121–122), the final price of a banquet is difficult to predict due to many variables. *Okāsan* calculates the price of the food served, the length of a party, the number of *geiko* etc. while having in mind customers themselves. It seems that two patterns have started to emerge at the same time, namely one for long-term patrons and the other for occasional customers. Such an evolution in the scheme involving money transactions is a revolutionary step in the *kagai*. Thus, it is another consequence of opening this world to one-timers. New type of offers, with pre-determined costs or requirements to pay in advance, is a contradiction of the traditional approach to business matters.

A NEW PLATFORM OF COMMUNICATION

It has come to light that *kagai* from Kyoto have started to feel that they have become the object of an intensified interest from the media. Although the *geiko* Kimina argues that “there is a new trend to save the traditional *maiko* and *geiko* world in society right now”, she remains aware of the recipient’s understanding often acquired from media sources, giving him a false impression of possessing profound knowledge (Foster, 2009, p. 65). While voices like this create an impression that an outside world is knocking on the doors of vanishing traditional entertainment districts, it appears that *kagai* members are also interacting more and more actively with the rest of the society. One of the milestones was the creation of a website by the *geiko* Koito from Miyagawa-chō, in 1996. As her intention was to prevent *geiko* culture from vanishing, it was met with warm welcome from the public (Sato, 2006, p. 97). Koito was the first to unveil the mystery of the *maiko*’s daily life via the Internet. Downer observed that the *maiko* Komaki who, as debuted by Koito, “was the first *maiko* of the cyber age”. Komaki’s journey, from “dreams come true” to the struggle with her daily routine, showed the pros and cons of this career choice (Downer, 2002, pp. 177–178). As this example presented an alternative way of communication, some other members of the community followed in Koito’s footsteps. Kamishichiken Ichimame was another Internet star whose online activity was noted worldwide. On her blog, she described her routine as including music and dance lessons (Rook, 2007). The idea of hosting a blog was continued by other *maiko* who belonged to the same Ichi *ochaya* as Ichimame. There were two versions available, the standard one in Japanese, and one in English prepared for foreigners (Kamishichiken Ichi, n.d.). Another pioneer blogger is the *geiko* Miyosaku of Ponto-chō, whose diary contains blog posts uploaded since January 1997 until the present day (Sakuchan Ponto-chō, n.d.). Although written only in Japanese, it is a valuable source of knowledge about the district’s life.

Actions undertaken by *kagai* members may be observed not only through their own websites or blogs, but also on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Some of them seem to be individual activities, while others are rather a part of an organised strategy of a specific enterprise. Some of the *ochayas* have decided to operate on the Internet in a more complex way. The Shigemori *ochaya*, located in Miyagawa-chō, has prepared a website describing the teahouse and a Morita bar, also belonging to the same

owners, combined with a blog about their *geiko* and *maiko*, preceded by an introduction (Shigemori, n.d.). The Yoshifumi *ochaya*, besides its own site (Yoshifumi, n.d.), manages accounts both on Twitter (Yoshifumi01, n.d.) and Instagram (kyoto.yoshifumi, n.d.).

The activity of the Koimaiko group may serve as another example of a coordinated and comprehensive campaign. Originated by the Tsurui *ochaya* of Gion Kōbu in 2008, it began with their cooperation with a songwriter, Madoka Hiroshi. A result of their work was the release of the single *Kyōto enren monogatari* (Authentic Record, n.d.). The next step was hosting a TV show called *Koimaiko no Kyōto bojō*, broadcast by the J:COM cable TV station. The show aimed not only to present remarkable places in the old capital, but also to let *maiko* get closer to ordinary people (Nobuyuki, 2013). The program began to be aired on April 2010, and since 2015, *maiko* from another *ochaya* – Odamoto, have also joined the group. Additionally, a paperback guidebook has been published. It contains a short biography of each hosting *maiko*, and some basic information about the Kyoto *maiko*'s image. The edition contains a CD, with excerpts of the episodes taken from the TV show (Watanabe, 2015). The whole project is linked to an official fan site. Everyone who registers can become a member of their fan club and access unpublished content. There is also an online shop selling souvenirs, such as photographs, bags or postcards (Koimaiko, n.d.). The long-term initiative of Koimaiko has allowed customers to become familiar with certain *maiko*, and to build some kind of bond with them. The creation of a fan club can indicate the popularity of this group. This may mean that *maiko* are becoming more and more accessible to the average person.

Becoming a writer is another way for the *geiko* to convey the values and traditions of *kagai*. This is a chance to show their point of view and to take complete control of the approach taken in portraying their lifestyle. Autobiographies of *geiko* who hold the status of the district legends, such as Toyochiyo, are available, albeit written in Japanese (Kiriki, 2007), along with that of Mameji (Arai, 2015), conveying memories of the past. There are also books prepared by relatively fresh *kagai* members which may be interesting for the young generation. The book prepared by Ichimame (Kamishichiken, 2007), already known to the public due to her blog, describes in a straightforward way *maiko* etiquette and their daily lifestyle. The autobiography written by the *geiko* Komomo (Komomo & Ogino, 2008) has also reached foreign readers. It is available in English translation and depicts the story of a girl who could be described as a citizen of the world, but

who chooses to return to her fatherland and starts her career in the world of traditional art. Her lucid narration, describing her daily struggles, doubts about her life choices, and successes, shows a typical *geiko*'s life. From the book we learn that they experience emotions and face obstacles, just like any other person. By revealing this, Komomo breaks the wall of inaccessibility, letting common people know the truth about her life in a *kagai*.

CONCLUSIONS

After taking a closer look at the development of new forms of entertainment offered in *gokagai*, it can be said that the product they offer to customers who have not had any previous contact with the community will probably continue to flourish. Indeed, the attention of tourists, when used in the right way, may help to maintain the existence of traditional entertainment districts in a living form. As this process has already started, the gates of such districts have been opened up to anyone who would like to immerse themselves in the *geiko* world. At the same time, the traditional scheme of things has not disappeared completely. There are still places that strictly follow the old rules, with entry limited only to carefully verified customers. Although new clients are treated with traditional hospitality, some privileges are unattainable for them. The most vivid example may be the differences in the method of payment, depending on the level of mutual trust.

The *geisha* figure, with all its stereotypes and fantasies, is a magnet which attracts foreigners to Japan. In Kyoto, their expectations have an opportunity to meet reality, while their visions can be confronted with the truth hidden behind the lattice doors of the teahouses. A desire to fulfil their wishes makes them potential recipients of entertainment performed by *geiko* and *maiko*. To make the encounter possible, both *geiko* and teahouse owners have needed to introduce changes in their working practices. A new product on offer must suit a new type of customer, a customer with limited time, resources, knowledge about Japanese culture and lifestyle, as well as the language barrier. The interaction between these two groups of interest proceeds not without difficulties. The "geisha hunting" phenomenon displays the dark side of this process. Thus, the transformation of culturally blind tourists' mass behaviour is becoming the biggest challenge of the present time. Furthermore, educational campaigns undertaken by the

official institutions, and the explanations provided by *geiko* themselves, are creating conditions to fight stereotypes. Thus, such visitors who are able to gain this knowledge from original sources may later change their views and become the advocates of truth themselves.

Therefore, *geiko* communities have reached the point when it is not the lack of attention, but rather excessive interest in them which has become a problem. Letting tourists enjoy their time in the company of *maiko* is a chance for them to maintain their businesses, by introducing diversity in their income sources, and to benefit from being a symbol of Japan. They have also become more open to new technologies, allowing society to better understand them by running blogs and Internet sites. This opening up to the modern world is a way for them to be seen as a living part of society as a whole. This move can be viewed as hazardous, when confronted with the traditional lifestyle and perceptible spirit of a past once frozen in such a form. On the other hand, it can be seen as a return to the revolutionary origin of the tradition of *geiko*, who were once trendsetters free to dictate fashion in Japan.

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